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ABSTRACT

A pilot course was designed to give immigrant adult students of English as a second language (ESL) training in English conversation skills and in life skills. The students, whc came from different ethnic and social backgrcunds, were required tc have a certain level of proficiency in English to take the course. Emphasis was placed on group activity and conversatien. Topics of discussion ranged from seeking employment to learning relaxation techniques. The students' reaction to the pilot was favorable, in general indicating that the experience had helped them adjust to life in a new culture. (AM)

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EVALUATIVE AND CREATIVE ORIENTATION

RITA LEROUX

Life Skills evolved out of the New Start program which had been established by the Canadian government in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. This course was created in order to help retrain the disadvantaged people of that area in order that they may better function in society.

The E.C.O. program was created in order to give English Language Training students the opportunity to interact in a small group situation using life skill techniques and English as the medium. The process was thus twofold: firstly to develop conversation skills in English; secondly to participate in life skill activities.

After having completed a six week Life Skills coach training program I combined my experience as an English Language teacher with Life Skills to come up with a proposal for a pilot course to be conducted at Vancouver Community College where I am presently on staff. My interest for such a program

sprang from my classroom experience with adult immigrants and my own personal experience of living in foreign countries. I realized that most people immigrating to a country of different cultural background and language underwent similiar trials - namely culture shock, disorientation, insecurity, frustration and anxiety. Furthermore some of the older students seemed to suffer from classroom shock.

Requirements for the course were that the students had to have a certain level of English in order to participate. I found that the most successful groups were composed of people classified as Upper Intermediate, which meant they could converse and be understood by each other. The groups consisted of people from different cultures, backgrounds and ages.

The emphasis was placed on the conversational aspect and group activity. A brief course outline was published and made available to the students at the college, and those who were interested came for an interview. Students were screened by me through an interview and an explanation of topics to be discussed.

A major problem which I encountered was related to the administrative aspect of the college. As funding was dependent on student numbers, I felt

pressured to fill my classes, although I knew that successful group activity revolved around ten or twelve people.

At first, permission was given to run two 3 hour classes for two consecutive months. The numbers varied from month to month and usually averaged at ten, which I felt was a good working number for second language students. For the program to gain momentum took time and publicity was an important factor. Since I was basically the only person promoting the program, I had a hard time filling my quota every couple of months. I felt, moreover, that my screening process was not as effective as I would have liked; thus two or three students usually dropped out after the first few meetings, and another two or three in the following month. Then budget restrictions cut the program to one 3 hour course per two months. Eventually the entire program was dropped for the same reason.

The E.C.O. program ran for just under a year, and in that time I developed a course which consisted of creative job search techniques, role playing job interviews on video, information seeking projects involving law students participating in the group

and talking about immigration and legal aid; also college counsellors, dispensing job and education related information. Group problem solving exercises were incorporated with second language teaching methods. Relaxation techniques and group interaction activities were extensively utilized. My experiences in sensitivity training in Canada and abroad helped me to develop the course to this extent, of course.

The main objective was to get students to use English and communicate on a fairly sophisticated level, so dictionaries were used and explanations were given. One sometimes forgets that even though students cannot speak English fluently, they can still be sophisticated and well-read in their own language. It was more important to give the individuals the opportunity to express themselves on an adult level than to worry about perfect language. Before students could relax enough to express themselves individually, they had to feel comfortable and gel as a group. This involved working through cultural and language barriers, as well as age differences.

Although I tried to cross-culturally mix the groups as much as possible with people from all over the world, the groups were often dominated by oriental people as they are the largest contingent of second language learners in Vancouver.

The groups varied according to the personalities of the people involved and each one evolved its own separate character. Every activity was twofold, teaching English and using Life Skills to do it. It was sometimes frustrating for all concerned and a lot was learned through hit-and-miss efforts. I had an outline of the topics I wanted to cover; however I had to be flexible and respond to the interest of each group. We spent a lot of time discussing culture and different viewpoints to problems depending on cultural background. We shared tremendously, and it was a great learning experience for me.

In conclusion I would highly recommend such a program be incorporated into any college which deals with immigrants. The students' responses to the program was favourable, and I compiled interviews on video in which they discussed their experiences and feelings about the course. These are available through the college. They expressed positive feedback and felt it fulfilled a need in the system. Small groups meeting for no more than three hours a day for one month seemed most appropriate and pre-admission interviews with each potential member a necessity.

My experience has taught me that a person's ability to learn a second language is directly related to his feeling of security. If a student is encouraged to communicate even in "broken English," then his ability with the language will improve with use. A relaxed, secure and motivated student will learn a second language more quickly and thus adapt to a new environment more easily.

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Topics for Discussion and Activities

Creative Job Search
Surveying Marketable Skills
Health and Nutrition
Prejudice and Discrimination
Group Interaction Activities
Culture Shock
Use of Video
Fantasy
Self Portraits
Scavenger Hunt
Using Social Agencies
Relaxation Techniques
Problem-solving Skills
Politics
Group Collage
Interview Techniques
Legal Aid and Immigration

Since many of these can be found in the Life Skills Coaching Manual listed in the references, they will not be expanded to their full potential here.

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